

VZCZCXRO8135  
PP RUEHHM  
DE RUEHHI #0279 0670919  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 070919Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7371  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4416  
RHEHNSC/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS HANOI 000279

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF AND DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: PASTORS GRANTED RARE PERMISSION TO VISIT POLITICAL PRISONERS

REFS: A) HANOI 097; B) 07 HANOI 2038

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Recent media reports confirmed that a group of Protestant pastors led by HCMC-based Mennonite pastor and dissident Nguyen Hong Quang were allowed to visit jailed human rights lawyers and high-profile political dissidents Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, at their respective prisons on January 31. In Vietnam, non-family members are very rarely allowed to visit prisoners, but Pastor Quang obtained permission from Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officials to visit and baptize Nhan, a longtime student of Christianity, and to ordain Dai, a longtime practicing Protestant, as a Christian minister. Mission confirmed with family members of the prisoners and one of the visiting pastors that the prison visits went smoothly, although some members of the group reported questioning by authorities afterwards. End summary.

DISSIDENT MENNONITE PASTOR LEADS CHRISTIAN RIGHTS GROUP  
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¶2. (SBU) In a widely-covered May 2007 Hanoi trial, human rights activist lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan had been convicted of "conducting propaganda against the state" and sentenced to five and four years of prison respectively, later reduced by one year each under appeal. On January 31, just before the Vietnamese Tet (Lunar New Year) holiday, a group of Protestant pastors visited Dai and Nhan, both practicing Christians, at their respective prisons after being granted permission by GVN authorities.

¶3. (SBU) After denial of an initial request to see the prisoners, the group of pastors led by controversial HCMC-based Mennonite pastor Nguyen Hong Quang (a religious and political dissident, former prisoner, and member of Bloc 8406, in his own right) traveled to Hanoi and visited the headquarters of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). There, they negotiated permission for a group of 12 Protestant pastors, several of them ethnic minority members, and seven followers to visit the two lawyers: Dai, in prison in Ha Nam Province and Nhan, in prison in Thanh Hoa Province.

¶4. (SBU) According to media reports, Pastor Quan argued with MPS HQ that "foreigners," referring to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), had already been granted access to the prisoners (Ref. B). Pastor Quang threatened to join Catholic prayer vigils in Hanoi protesting property rights (Ref. A), if not granted access to the prisoners.

¶5. (SBU) The mother of Le Thi Cong Nhan, Mrs. Tran Thi Le, told us that only four pastors out of the large group of Christian pastors and followers were allowed in to see her daughter. After years of studying Christian doctrine and preparing for baptism before her arrest, Nhan was officially baptized a Christian by the delegation. Ms. Le said Dai's wife had also confirmed his ordination by the pastors as a "minister of Christ."

¶6. (SBU) POL contacted a member of the group of pastors who visited Dai and Nhan, who said that the group was greeted "warmly" by the wardens of each prison, and that the visit, overall, went very smoothly. However, when the group asked to visit ethnic minority prisoners they knew of, those requests were denied. In addition, some members of the group reported that they were questioned by police after returning to their home provinces.

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